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AUTHOR Slowinski, Betty J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses French and American cultural differences and their effect on the conduct of business in both countries, as well as the results of the Banque Indosuez survey of French and American attitudes towards each other. The French tend to be less committed to schedules, appointments, and deadlines than Americans, and are more circumspect in business communication and meetings. They still have some aversion to discussing money, and are less willing to take economic risks than Americans. The French education system is highly centralized and emphasizes logic, mathematics, and language skills, whereas the American system is decentralized and more pragmatic. The majority of French business executives and government officials are graduates of the Grandes Ecoles, forming a powerful elite that, in reality, run the country. French executives are seen as more cultured and better educated than their American counterparts, but with less practical experience. Although French society is highly centralized and regulated, many rules are routinely ignored. French attitudes toward sexual harassment in the workplace are more lax than in the United States, with 45 percent of French women believing that being asked to spend the weekend with a superior to discuss a possible promotion did not constitute sexual harassment. (MDM)

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Center for Human Resources
Vance Hall
3733 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6358

(215) 898-5605/5606
FAX: (215) 898-5908

Wharton
The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania

ED 404 845

Title: The French World of Business: Culture and Commerce

The Case of the Wharton School

by

Betty J. Slowinski, Ph.D.
Instructor - Penn Language Center
and
Senior Research Associate
Center for Human Resources
The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania
306 Vance Hall
3733 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6358

Home Telephone No.: (215) 922-7389

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Title: The French World of Business: Culture and Commerce
The Case of the Wharton School

Length of presentation: 20 to 30 minutes

Primary audience: Language and business educators

Language: French

When teaching a language course on the French World of Business to business students (undergraduate and MBA), it is common knowledge that is is essential to go beyond the vocabulary and to fully describe the functioning of the various institutions. To cite one example in the area of labor relations, an explanation of the reason why, in spite of a 5 percent unionization rate in the private sector, unions are still powerful, is necessary. Likewise, the role of a works council is all important, as well as the study of the state-industry relationship. It is, however, often forgotten that it is as important to explore with the students the practices, cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs that have shaped the French business world, in order to enable them to fully function in the international business arena. Cultural proficiency should accompany linguistic proficiency.

I propose, therefore, to briefly explore the main cultural differences which exist between the French and the Americans and which, according to a recent study, are the reasons why nearly half of all Franco-American joint-ventures fail. The result of a survey conducted by Banque Indosuez in Paris on the perceptions of the French by the Americans and of the Americans by the French will be provided. These perceptions and their impact on the business world will be explained by exploring the following areas:

- Communication styles (French notion of time and space) and information sharing
- Educational system and the training of managers
- Intellectual elitism and formalism
- Hierarchical structures and power distance
- Attitudes towards money and money making
- Rituals in French business (written rituals, feeding rituals, working hours)
- Individualism and work versus social relations
- Relations between the sexes at the workplace and the new law on sexual harrassment

THE FRENCH WORLD OF BUSINESS: CULTURE AND COMMERCE
THE CASE OF THE WHARTON SCHOOL

BETTY J. SLOWINSKI

(not for publication)

I teach a two-semester course on the French World of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Students come from various departments (French and international studies majors), but the majority of students are from the Wharton School, both undergraduate and MBA students. Because of the presence of a high percentage of business students, the content of the class is highly important. Students expect to learn the appropriate language that will allow them to function in a French professional arena, but they also fully expect to learn about the functioning of the French business world. I cannot teach the word licenciement, for example, without explaining the procedures used to lay off workers in France including the role of the works council and of the social plan. The European legislation has to be mentioned in a number of areas, because it has an impact at the national level in such areas as lay-offs, family leave, plant closures and hours of work. Questions are constantly raised by students eager to know more about business practices in France and in Europe and should certainly be answered as thoroughly as possible.

What students do not realize, however, is that knowing the professional language and the practices of the business world is not sufficient to function effectively in that environment. They do not know that it is as important to explore the cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs that have shaped the French business world in order to fully function in the international business arena. Cultural proficiency should accompany linguistic proficiency. A recent survey (1992) of 2000 companies conducted by the Institute of Manpower Studies for the British Department of Employment rated understanding of foreign cultural and business behavior above language ability and concluded that today the rule for business people must be: "When in Rome do as the Romans do. Anything else is not only downright rude, but bad for business." Therefore, I explore in class the main cultural differences which exist between the French and the Americans. I base my remarks partly on my personal experience (I have been working with French and American business people for the last 17 years at the Wharton school) and partly on the literature on the subject (see bibliography). I use a survey, which was conducted by Banque Indosuez in Paris on the perceptions of the French by the Americans and of the Americans by the French, to explain how these perceptions impact the business world. These perceptions include:

Americans say that the French:

- lack mobility
- are inefficient and disorganized
- are rigid and formal
- are elitist - they put too much emphasis on status and hierarchy
- give too much importance to language, style and esthetics
- are authoritarian
- are individualist and selfish
- poor team players
- are distrusful
- are cultured, intellectual, analytical, and sophisticated
- but snobish and arrogant
- are opinionated, argumentative and judgmental

The French say that Americans are:

- direct and pragmatic
- quick and fast
- workaholics and obsessed with their careers
- friendly, informal and casual
- superficial and naive
- lacking education and culture
- competitive and aggressive
- enthusiastic but lack style
- conformist, but good team players
- materialistic
- self-assured
- very moblile

These perceptions stem from cultural differences of which one must be aware in order to avoid misunderstandings and be able to function efficiently in a French professional environment. The following list contains some of the main cultural differences which hamper communication and, as business is based on communication, eventually hamper the smooth conduct of business.

I. <u>French Time</u>

In their book <u>Understanding Cultural Differences</u>, anthropologists Edward Hall and Mildred Reed Hall point out that the most important thing to know about the French is that they are high on the polychronic scale. This means that they do many things at once, they easily tolerate interruptions and they are more committed to people and relationships than to schedules. For that reason, the French do not always respect schedules, appointments or deadlines. They would rather continue an interesting conversation than rush to a scheduled meeting.

Polychronic people live in a sea of information. They maintain extensive information networks to assure that they keep abreast of all developments. Interaction between people is constant and intense. Information flows from one end of the organization to the other. Everybody knows everything. Such is France. In the U.S., people tend to do one thing at a time, respect plans and take deadlines seriously. Information is compartmentalized and does not flow as freely. According to Hall and Hall "millions of dollars have been lost in international business because monochronic and polychonic people do not understand each other or even realize that that two such different time systems exist."

Let's take the concrete example of everyday life in a French or an American office. An American welcomes his visitors one at a time. Exchanges of information are therefore very limited. In a French office, however, visitors frequently overlap. A new person arrives before the preceeding one leaves. There are constant visits by colleagues. Telephone calls interrupt, so do secretaries (anecdote of the American executive working for Alcatel Paris). At the end of the day, a French executive will have collected a larger amount of information than his American counterpart, a fact which is a source of tension and conflict. Thus a French business person submitted to an American briefing will experience impatience and irritability. Being given information one already has can be perceived as humiliation. An American to whom a French executive will give very little information will feel excluded. Hence the traditional complaint: "The French are distrustful, they don't share information". We have here the very definition of the cultural misunderstanding.

Business meetings, therefore, have different meanings in both cultures. While following an agenda is important in the U.S., as information needs to be dissiminated, it is not the case in France.

The French rythm of life and work is also different from the American. The French start their business day very slowly. They often arrive late in the morning (again punctuality does not have high priority). According to Hall and Hall: "The French start slowly and build; they peak at late afternoon and continue going strong far into the evening." An executive was quoted as saying : "En France, il y a du temps mort et on sort a 20 h., en Amerique on sort a 17h. mais mort". Long business lunches are partly responsible for the ritual of long working days. This is a pattern French cadres have been accustomed to from childhood since the school day is also rather long compared to the American one, with a two-hour midday break. Moreover, leaving on time "ne se fait pas". The Americans have wedded time and money ("time is money"), but the French do not share the American obsession with time as a measure of

efficiency or as a serious contraint. Americans feel that the French waste time on the telephone, that in meetings "they get lost in words", and that they are generally inefficient and disorderly.

The French are certainly not in the habit of getting right down to business, whether it is a meeting, lunch or an important conference. They must make small talk first and get a feeling for the general mood. Business is never discussed at the beginning of a business lunch, for example. A successful business luncher in Paris must have a stock of anecdotes and subjects of conversation to last through the hors-d'oeuvres, main course and cheese. When the cheese is out of the way, then business can be discussed. The idea is encapsulated in the colloquial French expression: "entre la poire et le fromage," meaning a judiciously chosen moment. The French need time to discover the personality of their interlocutor, which allows them to better communicate and therefore negotiate. According to the Harper s Index, the average business lunch in France lasts 124 min and can easily go beyond three hours, compared to 67 min in the U.S., where one tends to be direct and efficient, a practice that can seem rude and unpolite to the French.

Likewise, French business presentations tend to be lengthy and full of disgressions. Americans can find them boring, while brief American presentations seem totally unsatisfactory to the French.

II. Attitudes Towards Money

Money has traditionally been a taboo subject in France. Montesquieu, the French philosopher, summed up the French approach to the matter when he observed that "money is estimable when it is scorned." Until recently, the French had an innate aversion for the world of the company and of industry in general. For the elite of France, it was always more "noble" to be inspecteur des finances or an engineer working for the State rather than for a company, the purpose of which was profit. Inherited money is fine, but money-making has had a negative connotation. Salaries remain private. When, Christine Okrent, a star anchor on French television, revealed her salary, a scandal ensued and the revelation prompted a strike by employees of the network. An advertizing executive was quoted to say "Miss Okrent would have shocked the French a lot less if she had appeared naked rather than reveal her salary." The fact is that the French have always found money and talking about it indecent. The sociologist, Emmanuel Todd, points out that the negative connotation of money-making had been reinforced by the Catholic Church. De-christianization of France has somewhat eroded that image, but he predicts that France would never embrace money "as a positive value a l'americaine." The traditional French attitude to wealth is conservative, not

dynamic and is encapsulated in the word "patrimoine," which is a family trust that is to be protected and passed on to the next generation.

In the last ten years there has been a revolution in attitudes, however. There is now an acceptance that companies produce wealth and therefore jobs and the fact that this revolution happened under a socialist government has given the view even more credence. In her first interview as prime minister Cresson was quoted as saying: "Money is not good, but money is not bad either. it is neutral."

Because of the differences in attitudes towards time and money, the definition of profit can differ greatly between American and French executives. This crucial cultural difference has been at the root of many failed Franco-American joint ventures. Because of their conservative attitude towards money, the French will also take fewer risks than the Americans. Venture-capitalisits are actually insured in France. Just as Americans have always extolled money, the French, in spite of the recent reconciliation with the subject, always have and continue to place a much higher premium on education. Intellect and educational credentials indicate status and competence in France, in much the same way as an individual's salary situates a person in the U.S. One cannot understand the French manager without an understanding of the educational system of which he is the product.

III. The French Education System

The Education Nationale is a "dinosaur" with a highly centralized administration. Public expenditure on education is higher than anywhere else in the EC (5.5 % of GDP). There is a saying in France that the minister of education knows at each hour of the day what is being taught in every classroom throughout the country. High school studies are sanctioned by the Baccalaureat, a national ritual when about 50 % of the nation's students sit down at the same time, on the same days, to answer the same subjects. The entire French nation revels in the terror and the tension of this exam, which has been called by many "the most sadistic of exams," and which determines whether you will succeed brilliantly in life or join the ranks of the unemployed. The fact that all students embark on this obstacle course with a philosophy paper makes it a bizarre ritual.

The questions asked last year were:
1) Can interest be a moral value?
2) Can self-knowledge be sincere?
3) How do you know that a problem is philosophical?
4) Philosophy is totally useless but indispensible

The learning process is characterized by cramming, with little scope for personal initiative. Learning to structure knowledge and to present it is an important pedagogic objective. Stanley Hoffman, a professor of political science at Harvard, points out that the main objective of the French educational system is to eliminate the greatest number of people in order to select the final few who will become the elite of France. The weakest are systematically eliminated every year when a percentage of the class is forced to repeat the grade. It is a selection process through failure. Professional success is determined by academic success. The country is governed by its best students. Management is no exception to this rule.

Quantitative ability is reinforced by a selective system which concentrates on mathematics. The BAC C is considered the best preparation for the Grandes Ecoles, even if you want to study literature. Analytical abilities are stressed. From an early age, you learn to think clearly and logically and to organize your work accordingly, generally in three parts: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. There is a great emphasis on language. To write correctly and speak well are signs of education and breeding. Because of the emphasis on language, the French are sometimes accused of prefering clarity to truth, words to facts, rhetoric to knowledge.

After spending up to three years preparing a series of strenuous entrance exams, the intellectual elite of the country is selected for entry into the very prestigious Grandes Ecoles (in the fields of engineering, applied science and management).

Individualism, erudition, quantitative logic, theoretical understanding, rationalism, and the importance of hierarchy are underlined by the French educational system. Such qualities are sought after in business; job ads in Le Monde, for example, will typically ask for: "analytic mind, independence, intellectual rigor, ability to synthesize, to think precisely." These intellectual qualities are often seen as totally impractical and inappropriate to pragmatic thinkers such as Americans.

It is achievement in the educational field which determines success. The top graduates of the elite schools run the country, both the government and industry. The French are seen by foreigners as obsessed by diplomas and abstract values. Thus management is considered as an intellectually demanding exercise, a conception very different from the Anglo-Saxon view of management as a pragmatic fairly straightforward activity.

A French researcher, Michel Bauer, did a study on the origins of the CEOs of France's 200 biggest companies, which

shows that 75% of them are graduates of the Grandes Ecoles (1/3 from ENA and Polytechnique), while only 6.6% graduated from a university and 6.1% from a foreign school. If diplomas are important, Bauer shows that two other factors play an important role:

1) Family ties with the owner or founder. Ex: Air Liquide is headed by the son in law of the founder; Club Med by the son; Michelin is still controlled by the family; Peugeot's board of directors has 5 family members. For many years, France's industrialization lagged behind her European neighbors because French firms chose to avoid industrialization in order to keep the family structure intact. Business was a financial extension of the family unit. Therefore, borrowing and risks were kept at a minimum to avoid the possibility of bringing shame to the family name through failure. The main purpose of profit was to protect the independence of the enterprise. Growth was not an issue. Therefore, the notion of profit is very different in France and in the U.S., particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises, and management style is often paternalistic and authoritarian. French management also tends to avoid risk-taking because, as with a family-run business, a bad decision tends to rest with one person.

2) In addition to diplomas and family ties, the third important factor is government ties. Bauer shows that the bigger the company is, the more likely it is to be headed by a former high civil servant. Of the 50 largest companies, 54% of the CEOs have held jobs in government administrations, with the finance ministry being the most prestigious. To succeed in business, it is best to train in government. Because people in government and in industry have gone to the same schools and because many have trained in government before they go to industry, the system creates a strong informal underground network of relationships between industry and the state. It is said that those who belong to the club are hunted by companies just as much for the content of their address books as for their brains. (loi des copains) The system functions in exactly the same way whether the government is socialist or conservative, whether a company is nationalized or privatized. (This practice is called pantouflage or parachutage). An American working in Paris has to be aware of such a network.

IV. What is the Impact of Such a System on French Managers?

First, when career is determined at the beginning of one's professional life, it is difficult to motivate individuals. Hence Americans see French as lacking motivation and French see Americans as being obsessed with career. It is a fact that after a grueling educational system, those who make it to the top are tempted to enjoy

the fruits of their success and are more ready to retire than to keep on performing. Because of the comfort of the network they belong to, French managers are also reluctant to go abroad or even leave Paris. This has reinforced their Frenchness and lack of mobility.

Second, because of the educational background, French managers are seen as extremely cultured, but lacking in practical experience. It is not unusual for a graduate from a Grande Ecole to be parachuted from a civil service post to the top administration of a company. As one French CEO said: "When I graduated from X, I knew everything, but nothing else." A French cadre was quoted as saying to his American colleague: "This will work very well in practice, but never in theory."

Third, individual competition fostered by education is partially responsible for French individualism. It is also a consequence of the presence of a highly centralized administration, based on the Napoleon code, that pervades the country from the national level down through the regional, departmental and local levels through an elaborate bureaucracy. Because of their passion for anti-authoritarian individualism, the French are non-conformist and make an art of ignoring rules and regulations (it is the famous system D, which describes the shrewdness whith which the constraints imposed by society are transgressed or worked around). The French will, however, follow the instructions of superiors when their reason is convinced (see Ackerman study, 1988). Because of their individualism, they will prefer the original solution to a more practical one, and will find it difficult to work in groups. (Hence, "the French are poor team-players".) This individualism can have disastrous consequences for Americans operating in France. When EuroDisney tried to impose a behavior and appearance code on its French employees, it was seen as an attack against "individual liberties" and the company was taken to court by the unions. Likewise, within labor legislation there are many important rules and regulations (such as the compulsory existence of a works council for companies with over 50 workers or the obligation to bargain on a yearly basis on wages and hours of work), which are often ignored. There is a gap between legislation and practice. The problem for Americans operating in France is to know which rules can be ignored and which rules are sacred (such as those dealing with the respect of individual freedoms).

The formalities of the rituals of the business world are a way of protecting individualism. The desire for ritualization is a manifestation of the desire to preserve distance and independence. The shaking of the hand, the use of the "vous" and of titles, the written rituals and, particularly, the coded nature of business correspondence contribute to the separation of the person from the

profession. In France, the person is on one side and Le Responsable on the other. (In the U.S., one says: "the person reponsible"). There is a desire to keep function and personality separate. It is difficult to reconcile cordial relations and formal (as opposed to personnal) authority. This is the reason why, in France, those companies which try to impose a more informal style of work relations are often unpopular. Cordial relations are seen as a way of motivating (and therefore manipulating) and as an instrument which subordinates the interests of the individual to those of the firms. (Hence, "the French are rigid, formal, and distrustful".) Informality can be seen as a manipulative device.

The French also make a clear distinction between public and private life. You will not see Mitterrand make a public speech from the Elysee with the pictures of his family behind him. French legislation protects the private lifes of all public figures. When recently a love affair between two television personalities was reported in a newspaper, the French establishment was appalled, not by the affair, but by the fact that it was reported. There is in France a much stronger emphasis on protecting individual privacy than freedom of speech.

V. Relationships Between the Sexes and the New Law on Sexual Harrassment

In France there is still a sort of acceptable game being played between the sexes, that can make it very difficult for American women. According to a recent poll, 20% of women surveyed said that they would not consider themselves harassed if they were asked to undress during a job interview, while 45% would not consider being asked to spend a weekend with their boss to discuss a promotion as sexual harassment. French women are definitely less sensitive than American women to the issue. Veronique Nelertz, the Secretary of State for Women's rights, has criticized attitudes in the U.S., saying: "the slightest wink can be misinterpreted," and warning that France "should not fall into American excesses." Her advice to women who feel harrassed by fellow workers is "a good slap in the face." The French viewed the Clarence Thomas hearings as a display of "if not puritanism, certainly hypocrisy".

Following a EC initiative on the issue, Belgium and France have been the first two countries to pass legislation on sexual harassment. The French law differs greatly from American legislation in that it applies only to sexual harassment by superiors in the workplace, with the idea of differentiating between sexual blackmail and old-fashioned flirtation by colleagues. The new law provides for very hefty fines and imprisonment.

BETTY J. SLOWINSKI
THE WHARTON SCHOOL - UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Madame Slowinski has a Ph.D. in French literature from the University of Pennsylvania. She has been working at the Center for Human Resources of the Wharton School since 1976. As a Senior Research Associate, she monitors industrial relations and developments in human resource management in France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Greece. She is a major contributor to a Wharton Information Bulletin distributed to multinational corporate subscribers and the author of a quaterly publication on the social dimension of the European Community. She advises multinational corporations on specific labor issues and on multinational labor relations in the European Community.

Madame Slowinski began teaching a course on the French World of Business at the University of Pennsylvania in 1979. She also worked on the Planning Committee of the Joseph H. Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies, where she participated in the development of the language component of the international studies program. She is presently teaching a two-semester course on the French World of Business to Arts and Sciences and Wharton undergraduate and graduate students.

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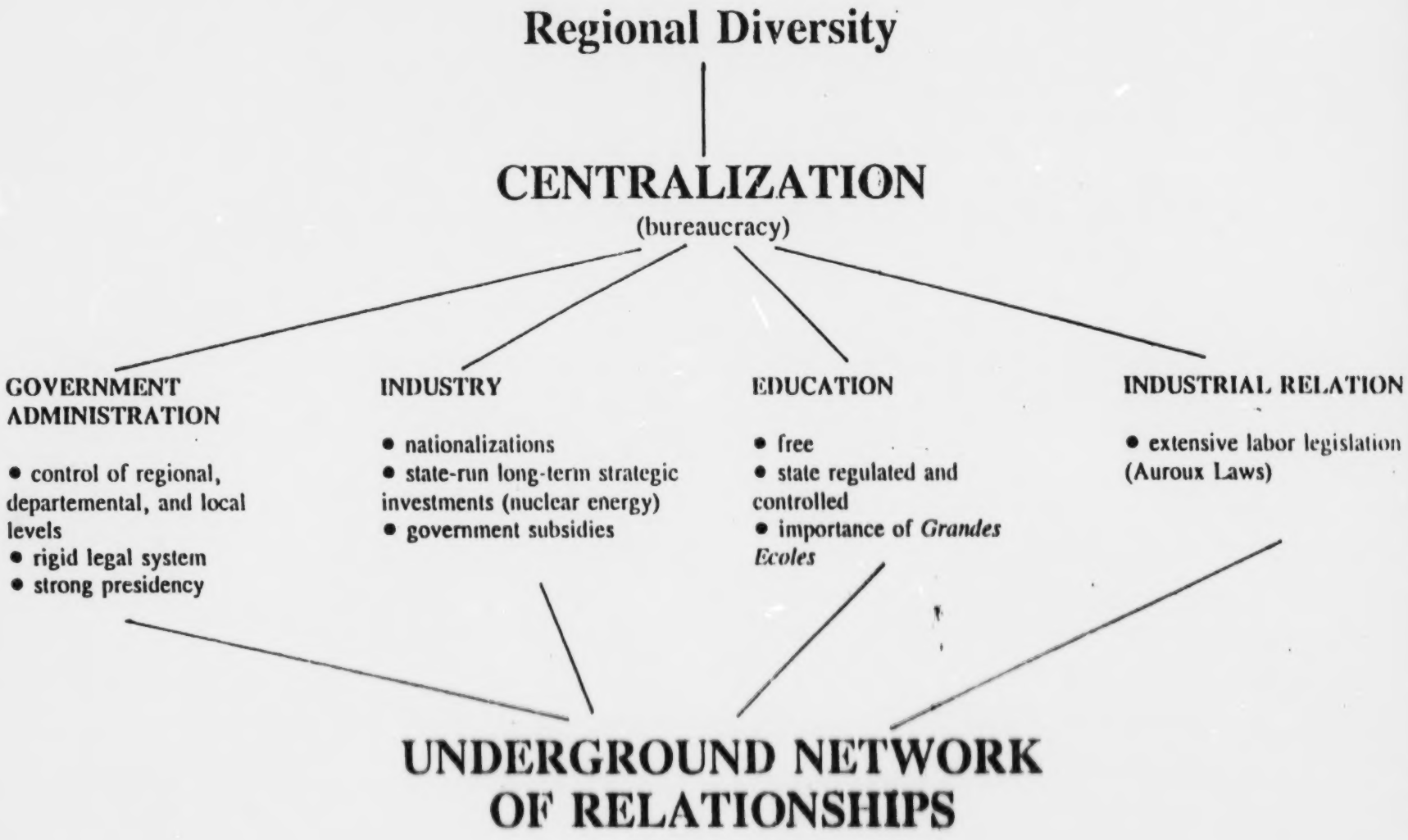
"In Germany, everything which is not explicitly allowed, is prohibited.

In the United Kingdom everything which is not explicitly prohibited is allowed.

In France, everything is allowed, even if it is prohibited.

In Italy, everything is allowed, especially if it is prohibited."

Jean Sablon



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comparisons (Ackermann, 1988):

Proportion of employees in each country who accept the proposition: 'Basically, I will carry out instructions from my superior':

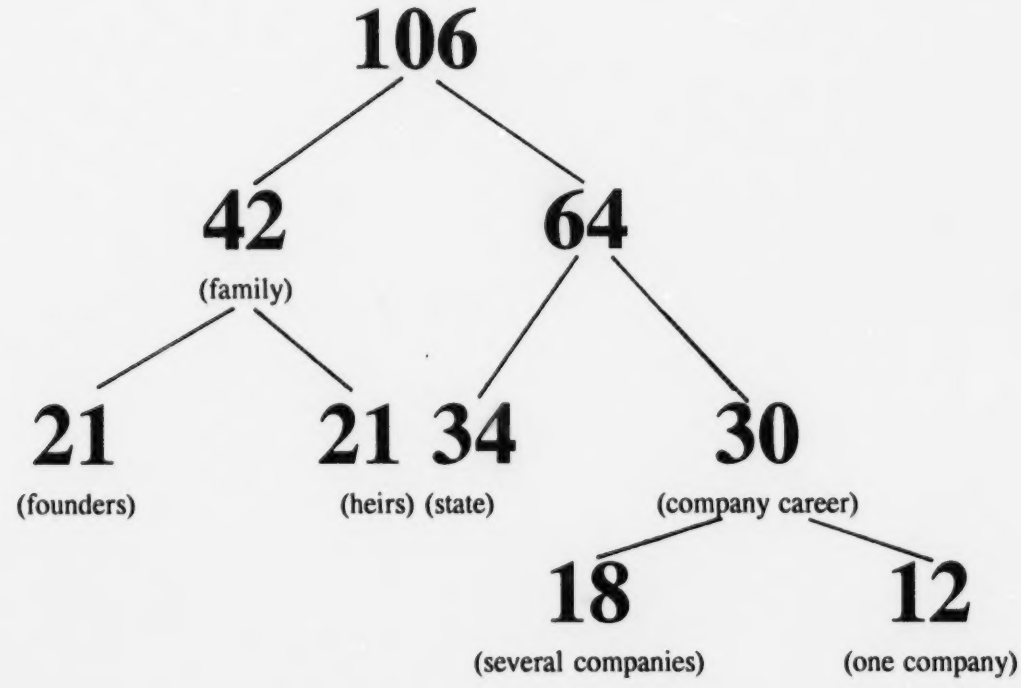
Country	%
Denmark	57
England	49
Ireland	45
Holland	39
Belgium	33
Spain	29
West Germany	28
France	25
Italy	24

Here, one may feel, is the stroppy individualist Frenchman we all know: folk wisdom verified by social science! The next line in Ackermann's table seems to support this view:

Proportion of employees in each country who accept the proposition: 'I only follow the instructions of superiors when my reason is convinced':

Country	%
France	57
West Germany	51
Spain	41
Italy	39
England	34
Holland	33
Ireland	26
Denmark	21

Background of the PDGs of the First 106 French Companies



EXAMPLES OF CLOSURES FOR BUSINESS LETTERS

1. Nous serions particulièrement heureux de traiter avec vous d'autres affaires, et, dans cette attente, nous vous prions d'agréer, Messieurs, l'expression de nos sentiments distingués.

2. Dans l'espoir que vous accepterez ces conditions, nous vous présentons, Messieurs, nos salutations les plus empressées.

3. Nous expérons que ces renseignements vous donneront satisfaction et nous vous présentons, Messieurs, nos salutations distinguées.

4. Je vous prie de croire, Monsieur le Directeur, à mes sentiments respectueux et dévoués.